

Political Violence: symbolism that only works if you let it

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Ambassador Christopher Stevens
– a victim of gesture politics?

The one lesson that all of us have learnt since the 2001 attacks on New York and Washington is that tiny networks of highly motivated minorities can now have a massively disproportionate impact on world affairs, partly thanks to the networked nature of global politics.

So today's [murder of the US Libyan ambassador](#) is going to have impact way beyond the personal tragedy. It's going to fire up the American election and, no doubt, send reverberations throughout the region as people there debate what kind of societies will emerge from the so-called Arab Spring.

But I hope we get this particular act of terrorism in perspective. It was [a highly orchestrated action in response to a very deliberate act of provocation](#). Both the Libyan Islamist group responsible and the extremists in the US who made the film are highly unrepresentative of general opinion or political attitudes in either place.

The whole point of this kind of act is to distort and even destroy dialogue and democracy. So when we interpret or report it we have a responsibility to contextualise rather than over-dramatise.

For me, it brings back memories of the [Danish Cartoon Controversy](#). I remember as a programme editor at Channel 4 News in 2005 when that story broke. I felt it was vital that we showed the cartoons, almost as a matter of principle.

But, of course, freedom of expression is always relative. Yes, we did show them indirectly, perhaps more than most mainstream broadcasters. But my editor at the time, Jim Grey, was quite right that we shouldn't show them without consideration of the effect.

Jim wasn't worried about attacks on the ITN newsroom, nor had anyone from the FCO rung up to say 'cool it'. Instead he asked us whether showing the cartoons in full, to demonstrate our commitment to free speech, was worth it when balanced with the degree of offence that it might cause and the effect it might have in inflaming anger.

The point about the Cartoons then and, the Libyan protest now, is that it's an entirely artificial situation created by tiny groups of extremists who are seeking to promote their own narrow agenda by exploiting more general principles. They are hugely media-savvy and know exactly how this kind of global howl-around will work. Their target isn't even the West, it's their own governments. It's depressing that people like Mitt Romney appear happy to join in with the lunatic fringe in Libya.

I think that it's a virtue of Liberal values that they allow us not to have to respond in kind. Just because I believe in freedom of expression does not mean that I have to defend someone's right to provoke violence. Just because I believe in respecting religious faith does not mean I have to sanction murder in the name of a God.

Update:

A day or two on and the point I make about the 'artificiality' of this whole story has been strengthened. It's clear that the people who rioted were anything but ordinary Libyans and it was an orchestrated assault not a spontaneous demonstration. And that film also seems a rather [tatty piece of fakery with uncertain provenance](#). Let the conspiracy theories begin.

Update:

[Sunny Hundal](#) has exactly the right phrase to describe the film at the heart of this row:

“it’s an epic attempt at deliberate trolling”

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